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SUBJECT: MedOff Visits Self-Help Supported Fistula Center

¶1. (U) Summary: On December 14 MedOff, CLO, and the Embassy's LES RN visited the Fistula Center at the Mendefera Hospital to deliver donated medical supplies and to meet American surgeons sent to train local surgeons on fistula repair techniques. MedOff noted that the hospital appeared to be well kept, although some of the hospital's medical equipment was not functioning. Post was also pleasantly surprised at how rapidly the necessary travel permits were issued. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On December 10 MedOff and CLO submitted requests to the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) for permission to travel to Mendefera (Note: All non-Eritreans, including resident diplomats, are required to submit travel permits 10 days in advance of travel outside of Asmara. End note.) Travel permits, if approved, usually take the full 10 days to be processed. Post was pleasantly surprised at the four-day turnaround.

¶3. (U) Mendefera is a small city of approximately 100,000 people located 54 kilometers south of Asmara. The city's 250-patient hospital was built in 2005 by the Chinese government and is now a part of Eritrea's National Health Service. The hospital's campus is large with several buildings separated by covered paved walkways. Despite being generally well kept and in good condition, MedOff reported that open windows in some of the buildings were not covered by screens, an obvious hygiene and malaria concern. MedOff also noted that the hospital's mechanical system for delivering oxygen and providing suction to patient rooms was not functional.

¶4. (U) The Fistula Center receives significant funding from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Johnson and Johnson. The local staff performs between four and five fistula repairs per day. For FY 2008 approximately \$10,000 of U.S. Embassy Self-Help funds has been allocated to the Fistula program for two key pieces of equipment to assist in surgeries. One piece of equipment is an obstetric ultrasound machine. This machine is a preventative tool for assessing women during pregnancy and while in labor for obstetrical complications that cause fistula. The other is called an i-Stat. The i-Stat is a hand held machine that measures serum electrolytes for both pre and post operative fistula patients.

¶5. (U) While at the Center, MedOff discussed cases and training for the local surgeons with visiting American surgeon Dr. Mark Morgan. Dr. Morgan informed MedOff that the local surgeons' skills were progressing under his tutelage.

¶6. (U) A hostel is located about 1.5 kilometers from the hospital to house fistula patients and provide nutritional support prior to surgery. (Note: Many Eritreans, especially those in rural areas, exhibit symptoms of malnutrition. End note.) Patients also use the hostel to recover, be given post operative nursing, and receive self-care education. The U.S. Embassy delivered donated soaps and toiletries to the residents of the hostel.

¶7. (U) Comment: Despite the obvious challenges of providing

medical care in Eritrea, the medical team was impressed with the ability and commitment of the staff of the Fistula Center. Although the facility would not meet American standards, the Center's staff is committed to providing this necessary surgery and to helping their patients overcome the social stigma of their condition. MedOff noted that the assistance provided to the Center through donations is being put to good use, as will be the future Self-Help Funded equipment donation. End comment.

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